

VETERANS & SENIORS COMMITTEE
Of the
Suffolk County Legislature

Minutes

A regular meeting of the Veterans & Seniors Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, 725 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York, on **August 18, 2005**.

Members Present:

Legislator John Kennedy • Chairperson
Legislator Daniel Losquadro • Vice•Chair
Legislator Elie Mystal

Members Not Present:

Legislator Cameron Alden
Legislator Jon Cooper

Also In Attendance:

Mea Knapp • Counsel to the Legislature
Fran Siems • Aide to Presiding Officer Caracappa
Carl Yellon • Aide to Legislator Kennedy
Alexandra Sullivan • Chief Deputy Clerk/SC Legislature
Jill Moss • Budget Review Office
Ben Zwirn • Assistant County Executive
Holly Rhoades•Teague • Director/Office for the Aging
Tom Ronayne • Director/Veterans Service Agency
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken By:

Diana Kraus • Court Stenographer

Minutes Transcribed By:

Alison Mahoney • Court Stenographer

(* The meeting was called to order at 1:09 P.M. *)

CHAIRMAN KENNEDY:

Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm going to call the Veterans and Seniors Committee to order. And we're going to begin with a Pledge of Allegiance, I'm going to call on Legislator Mystal to lead us, please.

SALUTATION

Thank you very much. We have two formal absences, Legislator Cooper and Legislator Alden have contacted me so they're not able to be here with us today.

We do not have any resolutions on the agenda, however we did extend an invitation to our new Director of Veteran Services, Mr. Ronayne. And I'd like to you to go ahead and come up and speak to us, if you will, please, get an opportunity to go ahead and actually meet the committee members here and just tell us a little bit about your vision for the office.

MR. RONAYNE:

Chairman Kennedy, thank you very much. I appreciate the invitation. Legislators, other guests, again, I thank you for the invitation to speak with you here today.

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

Just pull the mike a little closer.

MR. RONAYNE:

Is this any better?

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

Yes, thank you.

MR. RONAYNE:

I'm going to try moving it closer this way. I think really my time here for you would be best spent if I were able to answer some questions. Really my impression of why I was asked to be here today was to share with you my view for the direction that the Veterans Service Agency will be going from this point forward and what my vision for that office is.

I'll tell you very briefly that the Suffolk County Veteran Service Agency has a sterling reputation. Statewide it is known as an office that is efficient, productive and does a good job of serving the community's veterans; I certainly would not intentionally affect or impact that in any way, shape or form. We have several initiatives, we have some plans that we are in the process of refining for programs going forward. Probably the most significant of those would be the plan to significantly increase the amount of outreach done on the part of the office. We would •• and myself specifically with the Veteran Service Officers as well, will be spending considerable time not in the office, hopeful that veterans will come to us seeking services, but getting out into the community and making our presence known. By doing so, we intend to increase the number of clients that we serve in the office and, by virtue of that, further aid and assist the veterans, their families and their dependents throughout Suffolk County.

CHAIRMAN KENNEDY:

Well, thank you. I'm glad to hear that. As you know, your predecessor, Bob Smith, had an outstanding reputation both here with this committee and amongst the County, and he provided a whole range of services; as a matter of fact, the veterans from World War I right up until our current Iraq veterans avail themselves of and spoke of very highly .

It has come to my attention, as a matter of fact, through the media reports, some of my colleagues might have even seen it, that it appears the Veterans Administration is undertaking on their own review PTSD cases, disabled PTSD cases. I was just curious whether or not you've heard anything of that and what, in fact, you might be doing to assist our veterans.

MR. RONAYNE:

Well, I actually have a meeting when I leave here at Northport VA Hospital with Mr. Sledge, Joe Sledge who is the public information officer for the hospital, he's also one of the patient advocates. The review that you're referring to is the •• and there have been varying numbers in the reports, the numbers range from 72,000 to 78,000, individual cases of persons who are permanently and totally classified as one hundred percent PTSD. These cases being reviewed or

that they're suggesting be reviewed only go back to 1990; this will affect only veterans from Gulf I forward through the present war.

We've had some discussion in the office on this and it is our belief that this region, and specifically the New York area, will not be significantly impacted by this, and the reason that I say that is one of the catalysts for them to having decided to do this review was that there were some inconsistent standards being applied at various veterans administration regional facilities around the country. There were inconsistencies in the application of certain standards and criteria when examining PTSD claims. New York •• and again, Northport in particular •• has always had a very, I won't say it's rigid, but they've always had a very clearly outlined criteria for reviewing their cases. So we're hopeful that this will not impact the large number of persons in our area.

But again, I am meeting with the VA later on today, this is one of the items that we intend to discuss. Because if there are people in our community who will be affected by this, we certainly have the resources at the Veterans Service Agency to work them and hopefully assist in, if necessary, readjudicating their claim before the VA.

CHAIRMAN KENNEDY:

I think that's very important for you to go ahead and ascertain. As a matter of fact, on behalf of the committee, and I certainly will turn over the opportunity to have some dialogue with you to my colleague members, but if there's any concerted effort on the part of the Veterans Administration to target any particular area, be it PTSD or any other type of disability, I think it behooves us then to go ahead and to communicate in a formal way with the Veterans Administration.

I also have had occasion to have personal experience with the New York City Regional Office and while they may institute a consistent standard, unfortunately my personal experience is that their standard is one of delay, delay, delay. And so it does seem to me that while claims do get submitted, it takes an inordinately long period of time for our veterans to go ahead and have even an initial determination, let alone an appeals review or remand up to Court of Veterans Appeals. So I would encourage you to go ahead and to report back to us if you find that, in fact, you do perceive that there's going to be an impact here for our County veteran residents and we as a committee certainly will take the actions up.

MR. RONAYNE:

I'll happily follow•up and submit to you whatever the results of today's meeting are and from any subsequent meetings.

CHAIRMAN KENNEDY:

Good. And do any members of the committee have any questions? Legislator Mystal.

LEG. MYSTAL:

Good afternoon. I just want to welcome you to the County. Is this on? I'm on now. Welcome to the County and we appreciate you donating your services to the County.

One of the things •• I don't know much about you, sir, except what I read in the paper and there's going to be a press release sent out by the administration or something like that, and I hope in the future we will get to know each other much better. One of the reports that I heard this morning which really disturbed me, I don't know if it comes under your purview, is the case that's happening in Texas, in Austin, Texas, of a young veteran who left the Iraq war and came home and tried to enroll in school and they told him that he could not enroll as an in•state resident because he's been out two years into the war, which is totally ridiculous. And I'm hoping those kind of cases which come •• in my district I have a lot of veterans, I have four veteran •• VFW outfit in my district and most of what they have come from the VA in Northport in terms of services rendered to them. And I'm hoping that somehow we can, you know, contact you and see if we can expedite some of those problems that they're having at the VA hospital.

MR. RONAYNE:

Well, I'm not specifically familiar with this case in Texas. You did say he ••

LEG. MYSTAL:

It just happened, I just heard it.

MR. RONAYNE:

You did say he's been out of Texas for two years and that two years is a magic number. Because one of the things that we will begin to see in Suffolk County, and this will be seen nationally, is that because of the extraordinary number of reservists and guards people who

have been called to service, at some time in the past the standard for becoming eligible for the majority, if not all benefits, was to have served in excess of 180 days on active duty and to have been honorably discharged, or discharged under other than dishonorable conditions. That number has been changed from 180 days to two years of active service. Service for training, guardsmen who were mobilized for training and things of that nature, that time does not count. And what we're beginning to see is veterans are returning home and many of them coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan do not wise to the two years. They're activated reservists and guards people who are returning home from a war and they're being separated from service prior to achieving that two year mark, these people having served bravely in a combat theatre especially from Iraq war and they are being separated from service prior a clove that two year mark. These people having served in a combat theatre are not eligible for the majority of VA benefits because of that time line. So that's something that I would very much like to work with the committee on and this is something that we should target and hopefully be able to establish ••

LEG. MYSTAL:

Trust me, you will have a lot of support if you can get help.

MR. RONAYNE:

If we could establish some legislation and then move it and address this because this is just •• it's not a disservice, it's a disgrace. And we all know the numbers, the vast majority of the people serving right now are activated reservists and guards people.

LEG. MYSTAL:

That's all I have.

MR. RONAYNE:

I hope that answered your question.

LEG. MYSTAL:

Trust me, you'll have a lot of support in terms of that because I think it's a disgrace in terms of what they're doing to our vets.

MR. RONAYNE:

Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN KENNEDY:

Legislator Losquadro?

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

Good afternoon.

MR. RONAYNE:

Good afternoon.

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

I've heard most of what I wanted to hear. I'm happy that you came down today and made this presentation. I'm very happy that Chairman Kennedy put this together, even the absence of any legislation before us, I'm very happy to hear that you're on top of these issues. And I know this committee remains in very capable hands with Legislator Kennedy and it sounds like we have some good ideas we can work on in the future. So I just wanted to say thank you and welcome.

MR. RONAYNE:

Thank you very much. And certainly, my intention is to be as available as possible to the community, my door and my phone are always open. And I hope that we can evolve into a very strong, successful working relationship on the part of Suffolk's veterans.

CHAIRMAN KENNEDY:

Absolutely. And as a matter of fact, I'll echo what my colleagues say. Each and every one of us as Legislators have a number of veterans groups that we continue to work with on an ongoing basis, and certainly we want to know that we have the ability to go ahead and refer them over to an office where they're going to go ahead and get good, adequate, detailed and prudent service.

I would like to also just encourage you, if you do have an outreach schedule that you're contemplating or beginning to look at, locations that you'll be going to throughout the County, if you can share that with us I think it would be beneficial for us as well to know when you might be out in a particular area, be it a library or VFW or wherever, even our Legislative offices if

there's times where you need to go ahead and meet with folks. I agree with you that we should be providing assistance, you know, where folks live if we can do that.

One other item, I guess, I'm just going to leave with you. It has been an issue I guess that my colleagues have supported me on in the past and I know it's an issue that's still outstanding, I believe, and that is the State-based Veterans Home Per Diem Aide which was initially omitted from the Federal '06 budget. I know that I've spoken with Congressman Bishop's office and there's been restoration efforts I believe on the Congressional side, on the house side. I'm not sure whether or not there's been success on the Senate side and I'm just curious if you have anything on that.

MR. RONAYNE:

My understanding is that there was a •• and I think it was a one time infusion. There was a \$5 million allocation that was appropriated by Senator Clinton and I don't know precisely what the allocation to the State Veterans Nursing Home in Stony Brook was, but I do know that they did receive a portion of that money, and I believe it was intended to help offset that.

CHAIRMAN KENNEDY:

Okay. Again, what I'm going to ask you is for the next time that we have a committee meeting, if you can just do a little follow up on that so you could advise the committee here in particular. And if that is the case, if it was a one•shot, then what plans are to go ahead and contact •• or we will do a contact then to go ahead and see that there's restoration for the '07 Federal Operating Budget.

MR. RONAYNE:

I'll have that with me the next time we meet.

CHAIRMAN KENNEDY:

Thank you very much. If there are any other questions for our speaker? There being none, thank you.

I also just want to take note that we do have our Director for Senior Services, Holly Rhodes here. Thank you very much for showing up. But as usual, veterans and seniors seem to be the power committee and so we are at this point, I guess, adjourned. Thank you very much for

coming down.

MR. RONAYNE:

Thank you very much.

(*The meeting was adjourned at 1:23 P.M.*)

***Legislator John Kennedy, Chairman
Veterans & Seniors Committee.***